Rowland Evans and Robert Novak Post 3/25/73

They've Given Up on Mr. Gray

The White House has privately—and not at all tearfully—given up hopes that the Senate will confirm L. Patrick Gray III as the second director of the FBI, believing that Gray buried himself with his own blundering.

A serious search for Gray's successor has not yet begun, contrary to published reports that President Nixon has decided on Washington's Police Chief Jerry Wilson. Indeed, high presidential aides say flatly there is no chance that Wilson will be named.

An experienced police officer such as Wilson is not being sought as the ultimate successor to J. Edgar Hoover. Rather, the job description talked about is a middle-level administration official (preferably with Justice Department experience) who, unlike Gray, has no connections with either the Watergate scandal or the Nixon political apparatus.

While some Republican senators complain Mr. Nixon cruelly undercut Gray by restricting his testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee, the White House feels he undercut himself by talking too much: They believe Gray blundered by not seeking counsel from his superior, Attorney General Richard Kleindienst, prior to the confirmation hearings.

What's more, the White House worries that Gray's deteriorating condition will get even worse if the judiciary committee begins to probe his record as acting FBI director. He could suffer from prospective testimony of the recently resigned assistant FBI director, Thomas Bishop, a Hoover protege and Gray's bitter critic (so far in private). Under sharp questioning, Bishop's famed temper could explode against Gray's record.

In sum, Mr. Nixon has no hopes of Gray being confirmed but prefers to have the Senate kill him off rather than withdraw his nomination. The White House counts on Chairman James O. Eastland of Mississippi to force a judiciary committee vote that, barring startling changes, would reject Gray.

As for Chief Wilson, the rumor of Mr. Nixon offering him the FBI directorship during their recent chat is pure fiction. In truth, the President regards Wilson as a superb police chief with an excellent crime battling record but unqualified for the FBI hot seat.

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With no fewer than 35 organizations present, backstage plotting to overturn President Nixon's certain veto of the $2.6 billion vocational rehabilitation bill started Wednesday behind closed doors in the Rayburn House Office Building—plotting that could profoundly influence the battle of the budget.

The fate of the three-year authorization bill is perceived both by White House strategists and leaders of the Democratic-controlled Congress as pivotal, with psychological side effects on the President's veto strategy to reduce federal spending. If the Democrats overturn this first veto, the President's veto psychology will suffer, strengthening the Democrats' anti-veto position on a dozen other bills.

With a two-thirds majority required to override a veto, House Republican leader Gerald Ford of Michigan needs only 146 votes to sustain the President. At this writing, that total is easily within reach if an expected 25 to 30 conservative Democrats vote for Mr. Nixon.

But over the next 10 days, those odds could shift, depending on the success of the lobbying effort. The 35 organizations that met Wednesday included the AFL-CIO (represented by its potent lobbyist, Andrew Biemiller), the United Auto Workers, a dozen national organizations (including Easter Seal) and state mental health departments. Their basic pitch was worked out by Rep. John Brademas of Indiana, chairman of the education subcommittee that drafted the bill at a level almost one billion dollars less than the rehabilitation bill vetoed by the President last fall.

The pitch: rehabilitation, including vocational training, is a 50-year-old program with strong voter support. The hope: lobbying organizations can get a massive mail campaign going to minimize Democratic defections and maximize Republican support for overriding Mr. Nixon.

That Republican support includes the prestigious Rep. Albert Quie of Minnesota, senior Republican on the House Education and Labor Committee. But Mr. Nixon probably has the important help of Rep. Joe Waggonner of Louisiana, the influential leader of conservative Democrats. Waggonner is keeping quiet, but his intention to vote to sustain Mr. Nixon is known to Democratic leaders. If he really works, he could capture those 25 or 30 conservative Democrats, most of them Southerners, that Mr. Nixon needs.

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